

*Rachel and Leah:  
Best Supporting Actors*

Seventh in the Family of God Sermon Series

from the pulpit of  
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Genesis 29:15-30:1, 22-24

<sup>15</sup>Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” <sup>16</sup>Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. <sup>17</sup>Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. <sup>18</sup>Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” <sup>19</sup>Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” <sup>20</sup>So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and

they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. <sup>21</sup>Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” <sup>22</sup>So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. <sup>23</sup>But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. <sup>24</sup>(Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) <sup>25</sup>When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” <sup>26</sup>Laban said, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. <sup>27</sup>Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” <sup>28</sup>Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. <sup>29</sup>(Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her maid.) <sup>30</sup>So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.

<sup>31</sup>When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. <sup>32</sup>Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben; for she said, “Because the LORD has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me.” <sup>33</sup>She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also”; and she named him Simeon. <sup>34</sup>Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, “Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons”; therefore he was named Levi. <sup>35</sup>She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “This time I will praise the LORD”; therefore she named him Judah; then she ceased bearing. <sup>30</sup>When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” <sup>22</sup>Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. <sup>23</sup>She conceived and bore a son, and said, “God has taken away my reproach”; <sup>24</sup>and she named him Joseph, saying, “May the LORD add to me another son!”

Thus, the twelve tribes of Israel are born to Jacob, and the promise of innumerable heirs is coming to fruition. In these ancient texts about the First Family of Faith – there is no getting around the fact that there is a Patriarchal hierarchy which commands the attention of the narrative. From Genesis through the rest of the Old Testament, down to the last of the Minor Prophets, Malachi – the God of ancient Israel will repeatedly be called the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The big three show up in the first two verses of the New Testament too – at the beginning of the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel: *An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers...*

However, I did think it important, before we end this series next Sunday with Jacob wrestling with God, that we would consider how God interacts with the more peripheral characters. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob always command center stage – but they could never have given birth to descendants as numerous as the stars without the women. But more to the point – God is deeply involved making sure the promises made to the men – also include the more peripheral women. God always cares for the least, the last and the lost. God always cares for the people out in the wings while some other foolish soul is stealing the limelight. When you think about it, it’s frequently the characters in a supporting role, rather than the big names, that have the greatest impact on the unfolding of our lives.

I know this is true when it comes to the life of faith. The people we often credit with nurturing faith in us did so in quiet ways, often from the sidelines: the gentle nurture of some beloved extended family member, a church school teacher, a confirmation mentor, perhaps a camp counselor during our youth, a friend who showed up at just the right time. Our journeys of faith are filled with characters on the sidelines of someone else’s bigger drama who, nonetheless, have played a major part in the revelation of God’s grace for us.

Today's reading is about that kind of character in the supporting roles – on the edge of Jacob's big, tenacious and self-centered drama. Jacob is now in Haran, still fleeing the wrath of his elder twin, Esau, having skillfully extracted the birthright and blessing intended for Esau. After he deceived his father, Jacob's mother Rebekah suggested he escape Esau's wrath, leave town and find a nice Canaanite woman to marry. So at his mother's suggestion Jacob has landed in the homeland of his Uncle Laban. In a word, Rebekah wanted her favored son to marry one of "her people," rather than find a wife from among the local Hittite women as Esau did.

The storyline that has revolved around the twin brothers up to this point, now introduces us today to a pair of sisters. Our focus shifts from the major character to the supporting actors as we consider how Rachel and Leah play a big part in the transmission of God's blessing from one generation to the next. In these old Biblical stories, as in our lives, if you look into the peripheral characters and the role they play you can see God at work among a much broader community of people. Indeed, sometimes the drama of God has as much to do with the smaller roles than it does with the leading stars.

Poor Leah was plain to the eye, and her father may have thought that her chances of marriage were dim. Joyce Hollyday points out that "Jacob himself must have been lacking something in the eyesight department to have been so easily tricked into marrying the wrong sister the first time and not realizing it until the next morning!"<sup>1</sup>

But as the story goes, with unsurpassed desire and devotion for Rachel, Jacob agreed to work another seven years to earn her hand in marriage also. As property, first of their father, and then of their husband, these sisters were locked in a patriarchal society with little room to move according to their own desires and devices. Rachel was

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed with the Sun*.

cherished by her husband, but she was barren and without children. Leah was not loved in the same way, but she was fertile, producing son after son. Leah's escalating refrain would rend our hearts: "Surely now my husband will love me." Rachel's desperation is equally wrenching: "Give me children, or I shall die!" Both are without power to change their situation, and like Sarah and Hagar before them, they become rivals under the circumstances. And yet, God assures the future for all the people of faith through them. Indeed, Leah and Rachel together will give birth to the twelve tribes of Israel.

God's ways with the world so often hinge on the characters like these sisters – people who are not the main players, people who do not have the power to call the shots, people who get swept up in circumstances beyond their control, and yet, whose lives exhibit the beautiful purposes of God.

My husband Larry and I were privileged to see "To Kill a Mockingbird" on Broadway a couple of weeks ago. It has become the highest-grossing play in American history, but it was no small task to get it there. Just last year Harper Lee's Pulitzer prize-winning book from 1961 was voted the best loved novel in American history. Both the book and the movie starring Gregory Peck are embedded in people's hearts and minds.

In his first draft of the play Aaron Sorkin stayed close to the original source material, but he realized it was terrible and didn't work at all for an audience experiencing the kinds of racial violence we are today – of innocent African Americans being shot by police at an escalating rate, of synagogues and mosques being targeted for mass shootings and being burned to the ground. Sorkin says he was influenced by the violent protest in Charlottesville two years ago between the peaceful protesters and the white supremacists putting their racism on public display. Sorkin kept going back to one of the novel's most famous lines when Atticus tells Scout to have compassion for everyone:

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view.... until you climb in his skin and walk around in it.”

Sorkin knew that kind of mentality had to be questioned in light of current events, in which insidious forms of systemic oppression and racism are being revealed. There is no moral equivalence between those who work for good, and those who perpetrate evil. He came to understand that he couldn't “swallow the book in bubble wrap and gently transfer it to a stage.” So what Sorkin does with the play is he creates an Atticus Finch with more ambiguity, and he gives the supporting actors a much bigger presence. The children – Scout, Jem and Dill become the narrators of the story, and more importantly the black actors – almost silent in the novel and movie – are given voice and have moral agency.

The housekeeper, maid and cook Calpurnia expresses her views and her ideology, and the wrongly charged and convicted Tom Robinson raises his voice in his own defense. Both of them argue with Atticus and challenge his view that the racist Bob Ewell, who beats his daughter and falsely accuses a black man of rape, deserves their empathy. As one reviewer noted, “Whereas Lee's novel read like a magnolia-scented coming-of-age tale that serves up a portrait of good and evil that is easily digestible to teenagers, Sorkin reimagines the story in a way that presents a more ambiguous moral victory. His Atticus isn't carved out of rectitudinous granite. He's a flawed man, a lousy criminal defense attorney and a parent who may be guilty of articulating a reductive view of right and wrong to his children, Jem and Scout.

At a time when audiences seem to prefer escapist fare, “To Kill a Mockingbird” packs a wallop with its look at a black man condemned to death by a bigoted criminal justice system.” The power of the play – I believe – emerges from the supporting roles, particularly the victims of a racist culture and criminal justice system. The play refuses to be so tolerant of intolerance because the supporting actors – who are the victims of another's drama on center stage – Tom Robinson and

Calpurnia are given the agency to stand up and speak out against evil.<sup>2</sup> They were trying to be faithful to the future God is ushering in – that all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Friends, the Bible itself – through which we believe God is uniquely revealed to us – can be morally ambiguous about some things. When I hear people talk about returning to the Bible as a source of family values, I just have to shake my head because of stories like this one with Jacob having two wives, and children by both of them as well as by their slave women. But at the same time, the purposes of God are indeed being revealed through complicated, morally ambiguous families like this one, God always cares for the peripheral characters on the sidelines and those on the bottom rung of any hierarchy.

The end of our reading today sums up the critical importance of Leah and Rachel, as the children they bear become heirs of the promises of God. “God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son, and she named him Joseph.” Rachel paves the way for the next major character in the holy script, for Joseph to take his part, but she herself, along with Leah, are also remembered by God, blessed by God, and they were given a special role in the drama of God’s good intentions for the world.

That is God’s desire for each one of us. There is no ambiguity about this: we are remembered by God, we are blessed by God, and we are given a special role to play in the unfolding promise that – a day is surely coming – *when all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

AMEN.

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<sup>2</sup> Brent Lang, *Variety*; Jesse Green, *New York Times*, 12/13/18; Peter Marks, *Washington Post*, 12/13/18.